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# BLACKIE THE BRUMBY



*by*  
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## CHAPTER I.

### THE STOLEN THOROUGHbred

IT had been a hot and breathless day—one of those so typical of an Australian mid-summer when even the most hardened of the bush creatures find life tedious.

Dusk, however, had brought with it a faint breeze which, stirring the tired leaves of the stately gums, gave promise of a mild night.

The first stars were diamond-studding the velvet of the heavens as a little cavalcade of horses, their unshod hoofs rattling not unmusically upon loose stones, made its way down out of the hills, first to water at the nearest pool, then to graze.

There were fifteen horses in the band, led by a large black stallion. Blacks, bays and roans, they followed him obediently and confidently, knowing that at the first hint of danger, he would be ready to defend them against all comers.

These were no ordinary horses, but wild, untamed brumbies, as much denizens of the Australian bush as the kangaroos, emus and 'possums. They were not, of course, truly native Australians, their ancestors having been imported from other lands across the seas, but not one of them had ever experienced the subduing influence of the hand of man.

In the great Outback, fences were practically unknown. Station owners allowed their horses to roam almost at will; and many horses that had found their way into the mountains and out on to the plains, preferred the free life there to the working round, and had remained.

And so they lived and bred and, in many cases, became pests—breaking into cultivated paddocks and doing more damage in one night than a settler could repair in months. They also lured other horses away from their owners to join them.

The band of fifteen, led by Bushranger, the black stallion, had been in the ranges for some time. They had been driven there by stockmen and others who had made unsuccessful efforts to capture, yard, tame and brand them for useful work. The leader had been named “Bushranger” by a disgusted Stockman who had spent almost a whole day trying to run him to earth. But Bushranger had been one too many for the stockman and had led him on a merry dance before taking to the hilly country where the rest of his scattered band had joined him.

Bushranger’s brumbies regarded the whole of the countryside as their own special domain and they ranged over it at will. They travelled as the fancy took them, and their knowledge of the bush, the mountains and the plains was extensive. Hundreds upon hundreds of miles passed under their restless hoofs, circumstances dictating speed and distance.

Grass and water, of course, were their major bodily needs and when the seasons were good they lazed along as they felt inclined. It often chanced that they would spend several weeks in one locality just loafing around and doing nothing in particular. Again, it often happened that within 24 hours they would be many long miles from their last feeding-ground—and man was generally to blame.

It was nothing new for Bushranger and his band to be hunted by human beings. Sometimes there were organised expeditions against them, and though one or two unfortunates had been separated from the band and captured, Bushranger always escaped.

The brumby band sometimes numbered as many as fifty. There were many wild bush horses and several mobs wandered about as organised communities. It had not been unknown for the membership of these bands to be interchanged; but Bushranger and his select fifteen stuck together.

It was not often that human beings went out deliberately to hunt the brumbies, though that had occurred. It was when the untamed horses ventured close to properties and made havoc among crops that frantic efforts were made either to capture them or to wipe them out.

Bushranger lived up to his name. In addition to being a horse of rare intelligence and a first class fighter, human settlements fascinated him. No matter how long he might remain in the unsettled country of the far Outback, eventually he led his band back to human habitation. He was never so happy as when he was causing a lot of annoyance to settlers by raiding their crops, but he attained the supreme height of delight when he succeeded in luring a horse or mare away from a settlement to join his outlaws.

Naturally this did not make him at all popular with the settlers and it was the understood thing that the man who captured and tamed Bushranger, or shot him dead, would earn the grateful thanks of everybody,

Of all the indignant squatters, the man most upset by Bushranger's depredations was Sir. John Sylvester, whose station property covered thousands of acres, and who numbered among his many horses quite a few well-bred blood stock.

Old Sylvester loved every horse he owned, from the rough and hardy stock animals to the stately thoroughbreds. Among his special favourites had been a mare named Margaret and the old station owner had thought that Margaret was as devoted to him as he was to her. But femininity is ever fickle. Margaret preferred the wild life of the open bush in the company of Bushranger the brumby, to the soft and easy existence of a coddled thoroughbred in a sheltered stable and fenced paddock.

One warm moonlight night in late spring, Bushranger and his band descended from their mountain fastness, kicked down the fence surrounding the paddock that protected Margaret and several other horses, and invited them all to come and have a look at the mountain scenery by moonlight. Margaret and a young colt accepted the invitation, but the others remained where they were.

Neither Sylvester nor his station hands saw Margaret or the colt again. The mare was quite content to range the plains and the bush as the mate of the enterprising Bushranger.

Of course the squatter was wild with rage when he learned what had happened. He did not need the advice of his aboriginal stockman that the wild horses had taken Margaret away. The broken fence and the tell-tale hoof marks all around the place were enough for his own practised eye.

Bushranger, being the intelligent animal he was, did not linger around the place after the theft of the mare. Sylvester had known of the band's haunts in the hills and immediately he found his mare gone, had personally led the rescue party; but none of them caught even a fleeting glimpse of a brumby. The whole band after the raid, the triumphant Bushranger at their head and Margaret just behind him, had made straight for the plains, travelling far and fast. It was hopeless to chase them, so Sylvester gave it up, returning to



his station homestead in a far from pleasant mood.

Though the loss of the valuable mare was serious, the matter had its compensations—that part of the country where Sylvester lived became free of brumby depredations. The wild horses had gone—for good, he hoped.

As the weeks passed, the loss of the erring Margaret gradually faded from the minds of the stockmen and station hands, but two people could not forget—old Mr. Sylvester himself, and his young son, George.

George Sylvester, aged eleven, was a sturdy, curly-headed bush-bred boy, who had been brought up on the station with an intense love of horses. To him they were just perfect. Like his father he adored them all, from the shaggiest old stock horse to the noblest of the thoroughbreds. George, however, differed from his father in one respect. He had a good word to say for brumbies while the station owner hated them all.

The lad had lost his mother when he was a small child. What he had learned about horses had been imparted to him by everyone around the place—his father, the stockmen, the boundary riders and last, but by no means least, Black Herbie, the aboriginal horsebreaker and stockboy. What Herbie did not know about horses was not worth learning.

“What do you think of the brumbies now, George?” his father asked him after the disappearance of Margaret. “Do you still think they are fine animals and as good as any of my blood stock?”

“I’ve never said that, Dad,” protested the boy, “but just because they have lived in the bush instead of in stables and paddocks does not mean that they are no good at all.”

“They are perfect pests,” said his father. “As for comparing them with station horses, why, they have no breed at all. They are any and all sorts. Of course they are tough

and hardy. They would have to be or they would never survive their rough life.

“But I’m getting away from the subject. I asked you what you thought of the brumbies now that they have stolen Margaret.”

Young George looked thoughtful. He did love all sorts of horses. Yet he did feel keenly the loss of the mare. Still, he wanted to be fair if he could.

“Of course, Dad,” he said, “we mustn’t altogether blame the brumbies. What about Margaret herself? She didn’t have to go, did she? I don’t suppose old Bushranger bailed her up with a gun and forced her to run away.”

“Oh, I have no doubt she went willingly enough,” grunted the squatter. “That isn’t the point. If these brumby villains were all destroyed, as they should be, no horse owner would have to put up with these losses.”

He became, suddenly, most indignant.

“Just you think of it,” he exclaimed. “Just you think of that lovely, well-bred mare out there somewhere in the bush being knocked about and injured by wild and rough horses.”

“Don’t say that, Dad,” begged the boy.

“She won’t last a week,” his father went on. “How in the name of fortune will she be able to stand up to that life? Why, she has never been handled or treated other than with kindness since she was a little foal.”

Tears began to gather in young George’s eyes as he considered the picture painted by his father. Margaret undoubtedly would miss the easy life of the Sylvester station.

“Perhaps she will come back to us, Dad,” said George hopefully.

“Not her!” snorted his father. “Do you think Bushranger and his gang of thugs will let her? They’d kick her to death first. She’s miles away now, probably lying in some rocky

gully with her legs broken.”

“Oh, don’t talk like that, Dad!” cried young George in anguish. “I can’t bear to think of anything like that happening to Margaret.”

He broke off and gulped, hard. “I hate the brumbies now. I’d like to kill them all,” he said.

“That’s the boy,” applauded the old man. “Keep on thinking like that and we’ll make something of you yet. Of course they should all be destroyed. Ah, well, you go on with your reading. I have to look at a few things around the homestead.”

After his father had left the room, young George picked up his book, but he could not concentrate on the printed pages.

His thoughts were hundreds of miles away with the brumby herd and Margaret. What his father had said about the possibility of Margaret being harmed, had effected him deeply. For a while he toyed with the idea of packing a camping bag, saddling his own private horse, Ginger, and setting out in search of the missing mare. He would camp on the track until he found her, no matter how long it took or how hard the way might be.

As the idea took shape in his mind, he pushed his book aside and gave himself up wholly to thinking it out. What a triumph it would be if he could locate the band, lure Margaret away from it and return with her to his father! What a proud moment that would be! The boy’s eyes glistened at the very thought of it.

But Margaret had been gone now for more than a week. All the experienced stockmen sent out by his father had failed to catch up with the band. Black Herbie, noted tracker and horseman that he was, might have succeeded, but he had been away mending fences in one of the further-out runs

at the time. He had only just returned and when asked by Mr. Sylvester what he thought of the chances of recapturing the mare, had replied that since there had been rain over portion of the territory and since the band probably had scattered far and wide, the chances of catching up with it were very slim.

As young George turned this over in his mind, he came to the reluctant conclusion that where Black Herbie would fail, he himself had no chance of success. George was a sensible boy and though prone to day-dreaming like any other normal lad of his age, he realised his own limitations.

With a sigh, he dismissed horses from his mind, at least temporarily, and, giving up all thoughts of trying to read a book, left the house and wandered down to the harness shed where he devoted half an hour to polishing his saddle and bridle, which were already clean.

It was holiday time. George attended a small bush school with about twenty other children from the township and neighbouring stations, riding there each day on his horse, Ginger. He had no special boy friends because they all lived long distances from his home. His special friends were the station horses.